Newspapers by ancestry
https://www.newspapers.com/image/426804332

Downloaded on Mar 26, 2024

JUAN RODRIGUEZ'S ROCK 'N' ROLL LIFE: PART 4 OF 7

Songwriter of love and hate

LEONARD COHEN once demanded a confrontation over a harsh review; years later, he would be offering words of encouragement

Longtime Gazette contributor Juan Rodriguez has enjoyed a vantage point on rock 'n' roll that few listeners – or even critics – have experienced. Before the music industry became a well-oiled machine, he found himself with enviable access to some of the biggest names to pass through Montreal, as well as some of the city's brightest stars. In this weekly series, he looks back at the moments that stand out in his career.

JUAN RODRIGUEZ
MUSIC

Leonard Cohen was the consummate man about town in the '60s and '70s, a heroic romantic poet in a city of romance. I often spied him striding along Sherbrooke in his famous blue raincoat, and would admire his upright gait, eyes in the sky. Or loping down de la Montagne to Le Bistro, where he had scrawled a graffiti poem — "MARITA / PLEASE FIND ME / I AM ALMOST 30" — to a woman who had rebuffed him with, "Come back when you're 30."

I spotted him at the back of the New Penelope waiting for Joni Mitchell to finish her set. I had devoured his slim, precious volumes The Spice-Box of Earth (1961) and Flowers for Hitler (1964), and the scatological/spiritual novel Beautiful Losers (1966). The 1965 NFB documentary Ladies and Gentlemen ... Mr. Leonard Cohen was required viewing, revealing him in bed in a seedy Ste. Catherine St. hotel, gazing at the lurid posters of sex cinemas in the Main's red-light district, reading poetry to rapt audiences of earnestly sexy babes in form-fitting sweaters.

Now, in 1970, I was faced with reviewing his Place des Arts debut. He had developed an intense cult following, fans hugging the front of the stage, hanging on every precious word. He droned on and on, backed by a country band's somnolent slip-slidin' twangs. He bored me stiff. I wrote that I had a vision of Roy Rogers and Dale Evans galloping down the aisles to liven things up.

The next day, Cohen demanded a showdown at a Crescent St. bar. "That review was alley talk," he fumed. "I've got a bunch of big guys in my band who would love nothing more than to take you into an alley." (The band was dubbed the Army.) Three years later, at Théâtre St. Denis, he asked, "What do you have to do to get a good review in this town?" (He later confided that his mother worried he was doing something wrong.)

Promoting his 1977 Phil Spector-produced album Death of a Ladies' Man, he invited me into his modest abode off St. Laurent Blvd. We sipped cognac, he offered whatever was in the fridge — just a huge jar of kosher pickles — and he talked about working with pop's egomaniacal genius.

With Cohen's voice practically buried within Spector's gargantuan sound, the album was universally panned. "People really don't know how great or how bad this album is," he said, including himself. Spector suffered delusions of intellectual grandeur. Both drank heavily. But Spector had guns and the keys to the locked studio. One night he staggered over, a bottle of Manischewitz in one hand, a .45 in the other, put his arm around Cohen and pressed the gun to the poet's neck. "Leonard, I love you," said Spector. "I hope you do, Phil," was the nervous reply.

A turning point for Cohen was the 1988 album I'm Your Man, its synthesizer-based sound stunning, sleek and sophisticated. Cohen's voice, an octave lower than when he started out, was commanding. At his Théâtre St. Denis concert that year — one of the most fascinating I've attended — he played the microphone, all deep tone and heavy whisper, working the same trick as Barry White. Dressed in a dark double-breasted suit and matching T-shirt, clutching the mic in one hand while gingerly holding its cord with the other, he was the quintessential pro. No longer a helpless mystic, he was a torchlight singer, a smoothie. (Backstage afterwards, he closeted himself with that other smoothie, Pierre Trudeau. Recalled Cohen: "He more or less asked, 'What do you have to do to get a good review in this town?'")

In the '80s he graciously lent his name to my Canada Council grant application for a book surveying Canadian and Québécois pop music. In 1989, he told me, "A lot of people enjoy success in their youth, but when someone is still doing it past the age of 40, I think the work becomes more interesting." That day, in the brilliant sunshine of his unkempt little courtyard, on the eve of my departure for Berkeley to chase down my first girlfriend, Martine (whose brother, coincidentally, was in his Scientology class), he once again encouraged me: "These kind of things can be great for a writer. Go for it." There ain't no curve for love.

The sold-out Forum was filled with expectant fans on April 13, 1970 for the local debut of Led Zeppelin, the most-hyped group of the day. According to one website, my review was the worst they'd received up to that time. Zeppelin offered the conviction that more — three hours' worth — was better. The loudness was a "gimmick," I wrote, giving an "illusion of Importance." In short, they blew their wad in the first 10 minutes of the concert, and everything thereafter was mechanical repetition; my friend Herbert Arnoff at The Gazette expressed similar feelings. My brutal review — "ridiculously monotonous," "sluggish," "miserable" — took them by surprise. Led Zep, pioneers of the apocalypse, had never faced the criticism that they had "as much creativity as an encyclopedia salesman." Outraged, oh so righteous, at the airport they sought out a soapbox — the CFCF newscast — to vent their hurt. Big-time British heavies resorting to Montreal TV! The local yokel in me had to laugh.

At the Stones' Forum show in 1972, when Mick whipped off his studded belt and pounded a Persian carpet during Midnight Rambler, I felt it was all over. Rock 'n' roll was being flogged as burlesque. The formula encompassed about three sub-genres: insufferably sensitive singer-songwriters warbling about their navel, which they often confused with their heart (the insufferable Cat Stevens, Melanie); arena-rock bombast — a sound soon adopted by TV commercials for cars and beer — synchronized with stage lighting; and art-rock groups like Emerson, Lake & Palmer, Jethro Tull, Yes, King Crimson, Genesis, Gentle Giant and Pink Floyd, seeking to elevate rock to the level of Pictures at an Exhibition. The whole exercise was dispiriting.

Reading some of my reviews and commentaries today, I'm struck by how dogone earnest I was. From a November 1975 piece titled Rock: Only a Business?: "By 1960 the original rock 'n' rollers had been slapped into line and young people's music was perpetrated by the likes of Fabian and Bobby Vee, who wore thin-lapelled black suits and cardigans, and greased the kids with niggling ineffectual sexuality ... The dawning of the rock age, back in the mid-1960s, was likened to the dawning of the Age of Aquarius. Never before had there been a generation of young people who loved reading their press clippings so much. ... Most rock acts cannot make a single sound until acquiring tens of thousands of dollars' worth of equipment. ... The operative words are hype, money and technology, and you are considered 'talented' if you know how to work within this formula. ... If a record doesn't sound like it's loaded with production, it is not considered music."

Loudest show (by far): Motörhead, in a small CEGEP auditorium, the sound canvas nading off the walls. Most arrogant interviewee (no one else was even close): Andrew Lloyd Webber, prattling on about his godawful Jesus Christ Superstar like a self-absorbed British schoolboy. Act to whom I accorded the most raves: Liberace (how could I not!).

Home from an Engelbert Humperdinck interview in 1973 (big revelations: "I relax all day long"; loves solarium), I noticed a nauseating smell. Checked shoes, underarms, before realizing the offending odour emanated from my right hand. My split-second handshake with Enge left its mark: He was drenched in rancid perfume!

Bruce Springsteen's ballyhooed local debut, at Place des Arts in 1975, made me aware that rock 'n' roll was now driven by revisionist history, with hype providing the gas. That year's hip appeared on the covers of Time and Newsweek the same week; the previous year, former Rolling Stone record-review editor Jon Landau enthused: "I saw rock 'n' roll's future, and its name is Bruce Springsteen." The infamous line was appropriated for a Columbia ad, and Landau co-produced Born to Run (eventually becoming Springsteen's manager).

"Hype is the business of building up expectations," I wrote in my review of the Place des Arts show, "and Springsteen's talent is that he effectively gears his act to fulfill those trumped-up expectations. ... The way so many of (his fans) could hardly wait for his songs to end in order to express their wild approval is a measure of how the hype has affected the conscious ness."

Springsteen was midway through his first number when I heard a fan shouting to his date, "This is exactly like Dylan here in 1966!" Well, no. Back then, Dylan and the Hawks were inventing a careening "wild mercury sound" from the fumes of surreal poetry. As Springsteen admitted in a phone interview three years later, Landau's future-of-R&R quote was "unfortunate."

"There were times when I went out on stage and felt I had to do something to make the roof levitate." He sounded like a decent guy over the line. "Either the rock industry machine runs you or you can run it. And if you want to be the boss (now his nickname), you better be ready for it." And yet he was hardly ready when Ronald Reagan, campaigning in 1984, appropriated Born in the U.S.A. — clumsy bombast ostensibly about a Vietnam vet, but swallowed whole as a celebratory American anthem. By then, Bruce had bulked up in what he later confessed was his Rambo period.

He's always sounded mealy-mouthed to me. As I opined in '75: "His songs are bits of manufactured atmosphere, mainly about running away to the backstreets and sleazing it up with forbidden fruit — the kind of stuff they teach in high school 'creative poetry' classes." Bru-u-u-ce never really graduated.

It was obvious in the early '70s that much of the rock biz had become a Big Production, with musical values taking a back seat on the highway to fame and riches and hell.

It was the authenticity of black artists — bluesmen, jazz players, soul singers, rhythm-and-blues bands — that captivated me (starting with frenetic Jackie Wilson on the Ed Sullivan Show). For me, the best group wasn't down to a choice between the Beatles and the Stones, but rather the Memphis soul band Booker T. and the M.G.s.

The new R&B- and jazz-oriented booking policy at the venerable Esquire Show Bar, on lower Stanley St., enabled me to see and interview the legends of black music. Although my exposure to R&B had been triggered by the Beatles, Stones, Animals and Kinks, now I was meeting the primary sources. I was awe-struck. I devoted big Saturday page space to R&B and jazz artists coming to the Esquire, the Jn Concert Club, the Ring Sun and other emerging venues.

Please see RODRIGUEZ, Page E5

Mick Jagger at the Forum in 1972: the moment when Rodriguez felt it was all over.

MORRIS EDWARDS/MONTREAL STAR COLLECTION
Not boarding the peace train: Juan Rodriguez in 1971.

Leonard Cohen (pictured circa 1977) « ns steaming after Juan Rodriguez trashed his Place des Arts concert in 1970: "I've got a bunch of big guys in my band who would love nothing more than to take you into an alley," he told the critic.

Coming up in Juan Rodriguez's Rock 'n' Roll Life

Look for these instalments in the Culture section:

Feb. 16: A close encounter with Pink Floyd's fans; a prime seat at The Last Waltz; Paul Anka does it his way.

Feb. 23: At home chez nous; Neil Young soundtracks the critic's fade into the black.

March 2: A good cause doesn't always make for good songs; back on the wagon with the Grateful Dead; Kent Nagano provides an entry to the classical world; a return to Montreal, and to a love of popular music.

ROCK 'N' ROLL LIFE ONLINE

Each week, we'll be posting content on our website and mobile apps to accompany this series. Look for video interviews with Juan Rodriguez, playlists (available on the website only) related to each week's instalment, vintage photos, a forum for readers to submit their own rock 'n' roll stories, and more. You can also read previous instalments. Check back often at **montrealgazette.com/rocknroll**

Copyright © 2024 Newspapers.com. All Rights Reserved.
POWERED BY Newspapers™